The focus group technique in library research: an introduction*

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The focus group technique is one example of a qualitative research methodology used to explore the opinions, knowledge, perceptions, and concerns of individuals in regard to a particular topic. The focus group typically involves six to ten individuals who have some knowledge of or experience with the topic. The group discussion is led by a moderator who guides participants through a series of open-ended questions. The information gathered can provide important clues to human attitudes and values as they relate to the topic. Such information can be extremely useful to libraries that are trying to gain a better understanding of their patrons' needs and thus make better management decisions to help satisfy those needs. The technique can also be used successfully in conjunction with other research tools, such as surveys, either to help develop a questionnaire or to explain specific survey results. This paper introduces the use of focus groups in library research, the skills needed to conduct groups, and their strengths and weaknesses. Examples of the use of focus groups in health sciences libraries are presented, including the results of a survey from these libraries.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians often need to evaluate programs, procedures, or plans, and to understand how they will be viewed and accepted by their users. Determination of the feelings or opinions of those users is one form of research. The concept of research, however, can be forbidding, conjuring up such difficulties as developing unambiguous questions, long sessions working to make sense of statistical data, and concerns about the reliability and validity of those data. Many of these issues are familiar to librarians because of their involvement with quantitative research, and specifically with one of its more popular tools, the survey. Surveys are frequently used by libraries and library organizations as a means of gathering information. Whether they have experience with a lengthy questionnaire, such as the annual survey used by the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL) to construct profiles of academic libraries [1], or with a one-sided hand-out designed to help an instructor improve a continuing education class, most librarians are acquainted with the survey format.

There is, however, another type of research methodology, qualitative research, that avoids the use of survey questionnaires and eliminates concerns about statistics. Qualitative research employs methods that are concerned with words and observations rather than numbers, and the focus group interview is one of those qualitative methods. The focus group is a gathering of a small number of individuals, usually selected on the basis of common interests or activities, who are prepared to spend one or two hours responding openly to questions on a defined topic or set of related topics. Focus group members are expected to express their opinions with the understanding that a variety of input is needed and that all ideas will be welcomed and respected. They are also expected to be willing and able to respond to the ideas of others in the group.

While librarians may have heard of the technique and even taken part in a focus group themselves, they

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may not have considered its relevance in the library environment, viewing it rather as a tool of marketing and advertising, or for extensive research projects beyond their scope. For whatever reason, library staff have only recently begun to utilize the methodology. When they have, however, it has proved to be one that can provide important information for library evaluation, planning, and decision making [2]. This paper will provide an introduction to the focus group methodology and explain how it is conducted; it will consider some of the reasons a library might wish to use the technique, and explain when its use is and is not appropriate. Examples of how libraries have used focus groups will be included, and the paper will conclude with a look at some of the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology.

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

Focus group research is one kind of qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding things rather than quantitatively measuring them [3]. This type of research is used primarily in the social and behavioral sciences, and usually involves some type of interview with people, either in groups or one-on-one. The data collected are people's views, opinions, and ideas, and the data are gathered through their own words. Frequently only a small number of respondents are used, but the technique can be used to gather in-depth information from them without forcing their ideas into preconceived categories. In contrast, quantitative research gathers data by relying on numbers to describe concepts and opinions. This type of research uses a standardized tool, such as the survey, with predetermined categories into which people's responses must fit. Quantitative methods typically involve a large number of respondents, often carefully selected to represent a larger group. Because of their mathematical formulation, the results can easily be compared, aggregated statistically, and projected onto the larger population.

The following example illustrates the difference between these two approaches: A medical library is interested in how users are coping with a new online search interface. The library staff might send out a survey and learn such details as the percentage and types of users who have problems with the interface, and which problems were most commonly encountered. A focus group could then bring together the group that seems to be having the most difficulties and explore those problems in greater depth. The library might find that those having the most problems are older faculty members who are encountering difficulties not because of the search system itself, but because of their unfamiliarity with computers and typing. Moreover, the focus group might show that these same users are reluctant to come to training sessions because the classes are open to everyone and the faculty members do not want to expose their ignorance to their students. With such information, the library could take appropriate action. Instead of spending time and effort revising classes and hand-outs, simply providing individual assistance or some classes for faculty only could solve the problem.

In many research projects, qualitative techniques are used in conjunction with quantitative methods. For example, a qualitative method can be used at the beginning of a project to help develop a comprehensive questionnaire. By bringing together a group of people who each have some knowledge of the topic, researchers can provoke discussions in which important issues emerge. These issues can be addressed in a subsequent questionnaire. Qualitative research methods such as the focus group can also be used, as in the example above, after a survey has been conducted, to further investigate interesting results of quantitative data analysis. Finally, focus groups can be successfully used on their own, to gather information to be used in planning and evaluation.

How focus groups work

Focus groups are typically made up of six to ten people who have some knowledge of or experience with the topic under discussion [4]. The group comes together, usually for an hour or two, and is asked a series of questions. The questioner, known as the moderator, leads the group through a discussion of these questions, making sure everyone responds, probing for detail when necessary, and encouraging group interaction. While some focus group interactions are deliberately left unstructured to encourage more spontaneous discussion, most rely on questions that have been carefully prepared beforehand to bring out the required information. The questions tend to be open-ended, which gives the participants as much freedom as possible in answering, but also keeps discussion focused on the topic. To record the discussion, a tape recorder is generally used, and often a human recorder is also employed.

After the focus group session, notes are compiled and tapes are transcribed. All the information gathered is then analyzed, usually by the moderator and the person who took notes. In the analysis, the transcript or notes are coded in some way; each code represents a specific topic or subtopic that corresponds to the questions asked. The information is then rearranged by code so that comments about each topic are brought together. This allows the researcher to more easily identify everything that was said by the group about each issue discussed, and to draw conclusions.

The information provided by focus groups can offer important clues about human beliefs and attitudes. Even though the reliability and validity of the data cannot be measured in the same way that quantitative findings are, qualitative data are credible if careful procedures are used in developing questions, selecting participants, encouraging full discussion, and analyzing results. Repeating a discussion with several groups, using the same questions, or following up with other techniques can help in achieving this validation. The results, if kept in the proper context and used only to answer the questions asked, can be as reliable and potentially useful as those developed through quantitative measures.

Because the group format is a common means of eliciting information, it can be difficult to distinguish the focus group discussion from other types of group interactions. The focus group has a unique purpose: data collection. If data are to be truly valid, the group should not be used for other purposes. Focus group discussions should not be used for making group decisions, building consensus, or resolving conflicts. All of these activities entail a convergence of opinion, and the point of forming a focus group is to gather as many opinions and viewpoints as possible. The focus group should not be used to try to change attitudes because its main objective is to understand the various attitudes of those included in the group. While tasks such as decision-making and problem-solving are often successfully accomplished by groups, these bodies are not focus groups; rather they are committees, working groups, or teams.

Although focus groups can be useful in many kinds of situations, as a general rule, they should be avoided if the research problem cannot easily be discussed. This may be because it is either too complex—as in the case of physical facility design—or too intimate—as in personnel matters—or because it simply does not lend itself to question asking. It is most important that focus groups not be used as a method for gathering statistical data, because the sample used is small and not necessarily representative.

LIBRARY USES

Because of its ability to elicit people's genuine concerns and opinions, the focus group method is particularly useful in conducting evaluative research. Libraries, like any other service organization, want to provide their users with the type of services that best meet their needs, and to do so in the most cost-effective way. Focus groups can help all types of libraries to better understand and respond to user needs. Hospital libraries may find them especially useful in meeting the requirements of the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), as a method of regularly assessing the information needs of hospital staff [5].

In particular, focus group research can help libraries to

- identify needs for education and training among both users and staff,
- set financial or program priorities,
- clarify the library's goals and values,
- plan for new or enhanced services,
- identify the needs of particular user groups, and
- evaluate existing services.

Focus groups do this by bringing out a variety of opinions and feelings that may be complementary or even contradictory.

There are many examples in the literature of the use of focus groups in libraries, although few of them pertain to health sciences library settings. Because the term "focus group" is so specific, a search of the library literature in such databases as LISA, ERIC, and Library Literature retrieves many project descriptions. One of the earliest examples in the health sciences arena was a study conducted at Columbia Hospital in Milwaukee, in which focus groups were used to evaluate library collections and services [6]. The results were judged to be very useful; some of the data were incorporated into a facilities renovation plan, and other information was used in a grant proposal for end-user search technology. The University of Missouri, Columbia, used focus groups to evaluate the library's services and bibliographic training program for the newly implemented problem-based learning curriculum in the School of Medicine [7]. This was also successful, and one result was the development of a new orientation for first-year students, which included much more hands-on time and the distribution of an information notebook that served as a guide to using library resources. Focus groups have also been successfully used by two Regional Medical Libraries (RMLs)—at the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Nebraska—as part of their contracts with the National Library of Medicine to assess the information needs of different health professional groups and help the RMLs in planning services [8, 9]. These studies helped highlight the different approaches to information retrieval and the types of resources needed by various professional groups.

Survey of health sciences library use

Because of the lack of published information on health sciences library use of focus groups, a brief survey was conducted in late 1995 to find out how much the technique is known and used. The survey instrument is included as an appendix to this article. Of the 342 surveys distributed, 176 were returned, giving a response rate of 51%. Of these responses, eighty-five were from academic libraries and ninety-

one were from hospital libraries. Among the academic institutions, thirty libraries (35%) had used the technique, while only thirteen (14%) of the smaller libraries had, making a total of forty-three libraries (24%) who had used focus groups. Of the 133 libraries that had not used focus groups, approximately one-third (forty-one) were not familiar with the technique, and almost the same number of libraries (forty) said they had no use for it. However, more than three-quarters of all of those who had not used focus groups (103) stated that they would consider doing so in the future. In most libraries that used focus groups (70%), the discussion was led by a librarian on staff; only nine used a professional moderator. All forty-three libraries that had used the technique indicated that it was useful, although three respondents added the qualifier "somewhat." Only one library that had used focus groups said it would not use the technique again. This particular library had used a professional moderator and felt that the individual had shown no real knowledge of the topic.

The reasons given for employing the technique were varied:

- to use it as a tool in strategic or long-range planning,
- to learn about the information needs of specific user groups (one group targeted was the nursing staff),
- to evaluate library programs (one was a circuit librarian program),
- to aid in the revision of the library's collection development policy,
- to help develop a mission statement for the library,
- to identify the support services needed for computers added to the library, and
- to investigate user access to electronic publications.

While most libraries utilized focus groups to study the needs of users, some used the technique to focus on their own staff. One project involved reference desk staff in an attempt to better understand their sources of pressure. As a direct result of what was learned, the library installed another phone line so that reference questions could be answered away from the reference desk. This proved to be an effective method of reducing the stress on reference desk staff. Another staff-focused project was conducted to study the changes and transitions associated with a major automation project in the library, and help staff cope better with the new environment.

Library staff as focus group moderators

Since the moderator who leads the focus group discussions is a key figure in projects involving this methodology, the decision as to who will fill this role is of considerable importance. Some of those responding to the survey of health sciences libraries felt the need to use a professional moderator, while others felt comfortable using their own staff and were satisfied with the results. Although opinions differ on the need for a professional moderator, there are strong arguments for libraries to seriously consider using their own staff for focus group research projects including the following moderator qualities:

- good listening skills
- a personable style of interaction
- an ability to learn quickly
- enthusiasm for the topic
- an ability to probe for more information
- a high energy level
- prior experience with the topic
- excellent communication skills

If these qualities look familiar it is not surprising; they very much reflect the skills and abilities we look for in librarians, especially those working in public service. Thus, although most reference librarians will not have been specifically trained in handling small groups or conducting focus group interviews, the skills they have developed at the desk—careful listening, probing for information, building quick rapport with people—all point to the likelihood of their mastering this new technique. Apart from having interpersonal skills and the abilities developed in reference interviewing, librarians clearly have a better understanding of the problems and issues facing libraries than any professional moderator from outside. They are therefore much more likely to understand the issues concerning users and services that may be under scrutiny in the focus group project.

Drawbacks

Because of its relative ease of application, and the ability to use in-house staff, focus group interviewing should appeal to even small health sciences libraries. In contemplating the use of this methodology, however, libraries need to be aware of its drawbacks. While the whole basis of data collection of the focus group methodology is discussion, because the group situation is not truly a "natural" setting, talk may not be truly spontaneous. So there is always the question Do participants really say what they think or are they reacting to the more formal setting and saying what they think the organizers want them to say? A good moderator can help to overcome this issue by creating a relaxed, normal atmosphere for the discussion, and repeated discussions with other groups can help validate what is said.

A second potential drawback is also related to the group: Clearly group behavior differs from individual behavior and the results of a discussion can be skewed by the influence of the group. In fact, the behaviors and personalities of those included in the group are

important, but not always predictable. It is also true, however, that in everyday life, people's opinions and decisions are frequently shaped by the influence of others and rarely made in isolation. Focus group discussions can thus be said to mirror a natural social phenomenon [10]. Individual interviews may generate truly individual opinions, but in real life people interact; isolated opinions may actually be less informative than those generated in group discussions, as was found in the Linfield College study, which used both techniques [11].

A third concern regarding the methodology is the moderator's influence. Moderators have a major role in this methodology, and the discussion can be influenced by their skills and by the amount of control they exert over the behavior of the group. Too much or too little control by the moderator can seriously affect the outcome of the discussions and hence the conclusions drawn from them. Particularly when in-house staff are used, there is the concern that they will hear only what they want to hear, or give more attention to positive contributions or to those that reflect their own attitudes.

A concern related to this methodology is that there will be a lack of perspective on the part of those analyzing and using the information gathered from the group. In addition to the danger of researchers being too selective in drawing conclusions from the data, there is also a tendency for them to overgeneralize the resulting information and apply it to library users as a group. This can be seriously misleading, especially if only one discussion group is held. The fact that the group agreed unanimously about something does not mean that all library users concur.

Finally, focus groups can raise false expectations among the participants. Querying users about services and getting their suggestions for improvements can lead them to expect changes that may not be practical or possible for the library.

CONCLUSION

In spite of these possible drawbacks, the focus group technique has much to offer the library. Group sessions can be conducted relatively quickly—especially in comparison to other research methods. This reduces costs and the staff time needed to complete the project. Moreover, results are quickly produced and readily understandable, since they are usually in the form of a written or oral report that is in lay terms and not filled with statistical tables. Because in-house staff can run focus groups and expensive outside consultants do not have to be hired, using focus groups can be relatively inexpensive.

For the library, the focus group is a good, relatively simple method for getting in-depth information directly from users, and it can provide an enjoyable way to conduct useful research. The format lends itself to a wide variety of questions so that many library issues can be investigated, with all kinds of users, and, because it is "transportable" a focus group can be conducted almost anywhere within the institution. The information obtained through this method can be used to implement new and improved services, or simply to change the way things have been done in the past to reflect current needs. Conducting focus groups can also have other, unexpected benefits. The act of consulting users and listening to their needs has proved to be a useful exercise in public relations by those who have used them; it can bring positive attention to the library, and strengthen relations with all types of users. Given the continuing need for planning and assessment that all libraries face, and the fact that many of the skills needed to conduct this type of research are already present in the library staff, the focus group method is clearly one that libraries can readily adopt.

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APPENDIX A

Survey of focus group discussions in libraries, 1995

1. Have you ever used focus group discussions to obtain input on library programs or services?
   Yes ___ No ___ (If YES, please go to question 4.)
2. If NO, what prevented you from doing so?
   (Circle as appropriate.)
   a. I'm not familiar with this technique.
   b. I did not have funding for a professional moderator.
   c. I could not find a moderator to lead the group.
   d. I have had no use for the technique.
   e. Other:
3. Would you consider using this technique in the future?
   Yes ___ No ___

[Thank you for your response; please return the survey.]

4. If YES, what was the topic of the discussion(s) and who participated?
5. Did a librarian on your staff lead the discussion?
   Yes ___ No ___
6. If NO, who did you use to lead the discussion?
   (Circle as appropriate.)
   a. Librarian from other institution/library
   b. Professional moderator/facilitator
   c. Suitable staff member from your institution
   d. Other:
7. Was the technique useful? Yes ___ No ___
8. What were the results of your focus group?
9. Would you use the technique again?
   Yes ___ No ___